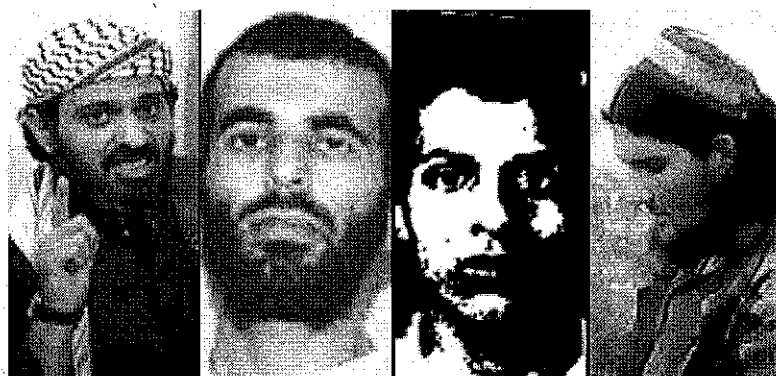


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Freed Guantánamo inmates are heading for Yemen to join al-Qaeda fight



Said Ali al-Shihri, Ibrahim Suleiman al-Rubaish (ID not confirmed); Abdullah Saleh Ali al-Ajmi; and Abdullah Mahsud

Tom Coghlan

At least a dozen former Guantánamo Bay inmates have rejoined al-Qaeda to fight in Yemen, *The Times* has learnt, amid growing concern over the ability of the country's Government to accept almost 100 more former inmates from the detention centre.

The Obama Administration promised to close the Guantánamo facility by January 22, a deadline that it will be unable to meet. The 91 Yemeni prisoners in Guantánamo make up the largest national contingent among the 198 being held.

Six prisoners were returned to Yemen last month. After the Christmas Day bomb plot in Detroit, US officials are increasingly concerned that the country is becoming a hot-bed of terrorism. Eleven of the former inmates known to have rejoined al-Qaeda in Yemen were born in Saudi Arabia. The organisation merged its Saudi and Yemeni offshoots last year.

The country's mountainous terrain, poverty and lawless tribal society make it, in the opinion of many analysts, a close match for Afghanistan as a new terrorist haven.

Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, voiced concern about the growing strength of al-Qaeda in Yemen. "Obviously, we see global implications from the war in Yemen and the ongoing efforts by al-Qaeda in Yemen to use it as a base for terrorist attacks far beyond the region," she said.

A Yemeni, Hani Abdo Shaalan, who was released from Guantánamo in 2007, was killed in an airstrike on December 17, the Yemeni Government reported last week. The deputy head of al-Qaeda in the country is Said Ali al-Shihri, 36, who was released in 2007. Ibrahim Suleiman al-Rubaish, who was released in 2006, is a prominent ideologue featured on Yemeni al-Qaeda websites.

Geoff Morrell, the spokesman for the Pentagon, said: "This is a large question that goes beyond the issue of transferring detainees. The bulk of the remaining detainees are from Yemen and that has been the case for a long time. We are trying to work with the Yemeni Government on this."

The US Government issued figures in May showing that 74 of the 530 detainees in Guantánamo were suspected or known to have returned to terrorist activity since their release. They included the commander of the Taliban in Helmand province, Mullah Zakir, whom the British Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Jock Stirrup, called "a key and seemingly effective tactical leader". Among others who returned to terrorism was Abdullah Saleh al-Ajmi, a Kuwaiti who killed six Iraqis in Mosul in 2008.

The number believed to have "returned to the fight" in the May 2009 estimate was double that of a US estimate from June 2008. US officials acknowledged that more detainees were known to have reoffended since, but the number has been classified.

"There is a historic trend and it continues. I will only say that we have said there is a trend, we are aware of it, there is no denying the trend and we are doing our best to deal with this reality," Mr Morrell said.

Officials said that a higher proportion of those still being held were likely to return to terrorism because they were considered more of a security threat than those selected in the early stages of the release programme.

Chris Boucek, an expert on the region for the Carnegie Endowment think-tank, said that up-to-date figures for Saudi Arabia showed that 26 of the 120 Saudis released from Guantánamo were either in jail, wanted by the authorities or dead.

Gregory Johnsen, a Yemen expert at Princeton University, said evidence showed that al-Qaeda was seeking to use Yemen to mount a renewed campaign into Saudi Arabia. He cited a recent incident in which two Saudi militants, one the brother-in-law of al-Shihri, were killed while trying to cross the border in women's clothing. Martyrdom videos were subsequently posted on militant websites.

The Saudi Government had boasted previously of a zero reoffence rate for Guantánamo detainees who were put through its widely praised rehabilitation programme for al-Qaeda members.

Robert Lacey, who writes about Saudi Arabia, made numerous visits to the Prince Mohammad bin Naif rehabilitation facility north of Riyadh.

"I know a number of young men from Guantánamo who were successfully reintegrated," he told *The Times*. "The programme involves the whole family with a mixture of religious re-education, patriotism, guilt and co-opting in terms of being given a car, job and a nice wife."

However, other analysts suggested that the claims for the Saudi programme were exaggerated. Mr Johnsen pointed out that an attack that nearly killed Prince Mohammad bin Naif, the Saudi head of counterterrorism, in August was mounted by a Yemen-based al-Qaeda terrorist who had offered to join the reintegration programme to get near his target.

"The Saudi programme is nothing but bureaucratised bribery. The ideologically committed terrorists simply won't listen," Mr Johnsen said.

The Yemen reintegration programme for terrorists was abandoned on December 10, 2005.

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